

Research Essay: Global Media Conglomerates and Debates about Global Media Ownership.

Whilst the current oligopolistic media economy could be perceived as privileging a democratic global society due to its ostensible response to the needs and wants of consumers, the assumed promotion of innovation and variety in countering competition by other conglomerates, and its flexibility in producing and altering content that appeals to diverse international markets, this pro-capitalist account fails to acknowledge both the mutual agreements between conglomerates, and the specific socio-political implications of its commercial interests that contradict this account. With limited competition posed from smaller companies and between conglomerates, and the explicit nature of the commercial system that disregards the views and values held by those outside the status quo of the dominating 'consumer' audience, it is cogent that an increase in the concentration of media ownership by conglomerates will never entirely adhere to a democratic society, nor seek to provide the audience with controversial or artistic expressivity that risks profitable revenue. However, the Walt Disney Company exemplifies how this global media ownership debate is not as 'black and white' as film theorists are inclined to acknowledge. With Disney's production of local and politically conservative content for foreign markets, and its encouragement of indigenous autonomy over production content, this ostensibly contradicts a patent one-way imperialist flow of media content. Therefore, while it is evident that the overriding autocratic production model of media conglomerates is designed to "permeate American culture" (Jackson 1993, p.109) through replicating the inegalitarian social structures of race, class and gender, it would be inapt to classify media conglomerates as completely subverting foreign cultures through the dissemination of American values.

While most national forms of media were domestically and singularly owned before the 1980s (McChesney and Schiller 2003), the radical shift towards a wave of global media mergers during the 1980s reflects the corresponding emergence of new digital communications, the shift of the United States' political spectrum to the eccentric right wing, and the associated increase of a neoliberal lax regulatory environment. Although post-Fordist modes of production had existed as far back as the late twentieth century where newspapers had adapted from family-owned companies to publicly traded corporations (Warf 2007), it was not until the rise of conservatives

who campaigned to “get the government off our backs” (Rule 1985, p.2) in which fuelled the governmental shift away from protecting the consumer and towards the protection of big businesses in the 1980s (Bagdikian 2014). While no single entity could own more than twelve television stations nationwide or were permitted to reach an audience of more than 25% of American households before the 1980s (Croteau and Hoynes 2006, p.93), these strict state-controlled limitations of station ownership and audience size had little influence after the 1980s due to the shift of the United States’ political spectrum that privileged big corporations. Illustrated by Bagdikian’s (2014) calculated decline of fifty dominant media corporations in 1983 to five today, it is evident that this gradual transformation in the regulatory environment provided the necessary foundations for the increasing corporate consolidation of media.

However, while the eventual legislation of the Telecommunication Act of 1996, and the following FCC cross-ownership proposals in 2003 essentially changed foreign ownership controls that allowed firms to acquire foreign companies, and relaxed the cross-industry ownership rules that authorized corporations to control firms outside of their initial telecommunications sector (Warf 2007), the integration and globalization of media conglomerates would not have occurred as rapidly had it not been for the advancement of communications technology. Although Warf (2007) identifies this conventional technological explanation for the growth of global media conglomerates as limiting, it is undeniable that the mass convergence of media industries and the merging of international corporations was made feasibly attainable under the influence of the internet. With corporations adapting to digital forms of contemporary media as early as the mid-1990s (Couldry 2012), this substantiates Croteau’s and Hoynes’s (2006, p.100) assertion that the rise of the internet “eroded the walls ... [between] distinct telecommunications industries” that induced the globalization of what had been exclusively national media conglomerates. Although this establishment of a digital marketplace and the deregulation of foreign media ownership could have “simply enhanced public service provision had a society elected to do so” (McChesney and Schiller 2003, p.3), these conditions were instead exploited by commercially-orientated corporations who survived only by integrating to “own everything up and down the media chain” (Turner 2004, pp.100-101). With five to seven remaining global media conglomerates in today’s

media landscape whose leaders possess “more communications power that was exercised by any despot or dictatorship in history” (Bagdikian 2014, p.3), this high concentration of 65% of international media controlled by the top five conglomerates (Albarran 2003) pose significant concerns to Barber’s (1996, p.123) idea of a free and democratic society that depends on the “competition of ideas and heterogeneity of outlets”.

With Time Warner becoming the largest media conglomerate by the year 2003, followed by the Walt Disney Company, Google, Bertelsmann AG, Viacom, 21st Century Fox and Sony (Bagdikian 2014), it could be assumed that this oligopoly of media conglomerates forces conglomerates to create unique products and services, and appeal to diverse audiences to compete outright with other conglomerates. Contrary to this however, the leading five conglomerates indulge in mutual aid and shared investments in the same media products, provoking not only concerns for the democratic nature of America with “thousands of media outlets ... [producing] highly duplicative content” (Bagdikian 2014, p.6), but also on the culture and job security of foreign countries due to this international dissemination of predominately American content. As these global media conglomerates are unwilling to risk such a loss that would amount to Adam Smith’s classical capitalist dogma of just one corporate victor (Skousen 2007), they instead share shareholders, interlocking members on their boards of directors, and have a total of more than 140 joint ventures (Bagdikian 2014). According to a 2003 study by Aaron Moore (2003) in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, Time Warner, the Walt Disney Company, Viacom, and the News Corporation share a total of forty-five interlocking directors. Due to this jointly invested aid where money, talent and assets are swapped between corporations to mutually expand the power and media concentration of these conglomerates, this restricted competition allows conglomerates to “push prices as high as the market will bear ... because there is no alternative” (Croteau and Hoynes 2006, p.20), and leaves “artificially narrowed choices in the media” (Bagdikian 2014, p.10). This cartel-like neglect of the social and political values of the “American public as a whole” (Wayne 2003, p.83) effectively proves antithetical to Habermas’ (1968) model of the democratic public sphere where all citizen views are represented through wide-ranging public discourse. Rather, without the governmental practice of cross-subsidization, the ideological marginalizing of

“political activity, civic values and anti-market activities” (McChesney 1999, p.14) by media conglomerates has resulted in the ideological discrimination against a less profitable consumer audience including those living in rural regions and inner cities, the working-class, racial minorities, and even those with political views unparalleled to a more valuable consumer audience. Thus, it is due to this commercial homogenization of content and embedded discourse induced by global media conglomerates in which raises many concerns regarding the diminishing of creative variety and democratic values expressed in the media, and the implications of this on citizens themselves in shaping their own democracy.

However, these global media ownership concerns expand further than the exclusive damage to America’s democratic values. With the neoliberalism of global market deregulations tripling the international trade of cultural goods from \$67 billion USD in 1980 to \$200 billion in 1991 (UNESCO 1998), the position of global media conglomerates to dominate over local media in foreign markets poses critical apprehensions towards the creation of a global village “based on the English language and Western lifestyles and values” (Thussu 2006, p.145). Although film critics by the likes of Belkhyr (2013) and Giroux (1995) have alluded to Schiller’s (1991) model of cultural imperialism as proving detrimental to the established social structures of non-Western countries, it is evident that this one-way flow of ‘Americanisation’ remains contested. While four of the world’s top five entertainment corporations are based in the United States (Thussu 2006), this does not necessarily mean that foreign countries are becoming increasingly “detached from the symbolic spaces of national culture, and realigned on the basis of the more ‘universal’ principles of international consumer culture” (Robins 1995, p.250). Conversely, this one-way flow of telecommunications is an erroneous label, as the domination of US conglomerates over local corporations is more complicated than Robins’ account suggests. While there has been an immense increase in the international consumption of media content produced by these American conglomerates, the evident co-production between these conglomerates with local production companies ultimately suggests that global conglomerates frequently adapt to foreign markets, promoting the “creation and expression of cultural diversity” (UNESCO 2014, p.5). Epitomized by Albornoz’s (2006, p.11) example of the US conglomerate strategy to employ foreign talent such

as “Chinese partners on site for a fast-growing market”, it cannot be inferred that the globalization of media conglomerates eradicates local media, and works to disseminate exclusively Western values to a non-Western audience. With the revenue of co-productions amounting to 2.78 times higher than national productions (Kanzler 2008), it is evident that in some ways the large financial and synergized marketing resources of global media conglomerates intrinsically work to promote indigenous culture.

These complexities in evaluating the debates surrounding global media ownership are embodied by the world’s second largest media conglomerate, the Californian-based Walt Disney Company that reaches more than 300 million homes in 120 countries (Thussu 2006). Disney is unique in that while it profits from more than twenty newspapers and magazines, several television networks such as the American Broadcasting Corporation and the History Channel, cable holdings including ESPN, 72 radio stations, and 54 national theme parks (Artz 2014), these are ultimately incomparable to the economic success of its animated features. With Disney’s ownership of Walt Disney Pictures, Touchstone Pictures, Hollywood Pictures, Miramax Films, Dimension Films and Pixar, as well as in television production and distribution companies (Croteau and Hoynes 2006), it indubitably has a monopoly in animated film content that dominates over other global media conglomerates and isolated corporations such as DreamWorks. Substantiated by McChesney’s (1999, p.23) comment that it “more than any media giant is the master at figuring out new synergistic ways to acquire, slice, dice and merchandise content”, it is cogent that Disney’s cross-media integration is uniquely successful in “packaging itself for mass appeal ... [through] the guise of innocence” (Giroux 1995, p.32). However, this monopolistic production of Disney’s animation cannot stem without specific socio-political implications on varying social groups, local media markets, and its targeted demographic of young children. With Herman and McChesney’s (1999, p.379) acknowledgement of the commercial interests of the Walt Disney Company that sells and promotes themes and ideologies for “product licensing and private profits”, this complicates an account of Disney’s replication of democratic and community values, and its positive influence on the social and historical education of children both within and outside of the American market.

While Disney's monopolistic animations appear "naïve, childlike, even childish" (Moellenhoff 1989, p.114), the dismissal of socially-sensitive issues, and the fortification of consumerist values supportive of capitalist globalization both have detrimental implications on social equality and the social values acquired by children. Exploiting Congress' abolishment of the Fairness Doctrine in 1987 that no longer required stations to cover 'controversial issues' of the community (Fisher 2011), Disney does not challenge social inequality for the benefit of a democratic society. Rather, it uses "mass-mediated words and images to create and sustain social relations" (Ricker 1996, p.42) in guaranteeing commercial profit. Compounded by the first U.S. war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq army in the late 1980s (Tristram 2017), the prevailing American tensions towards Arab nations and Islamic terrorism are embodied through Disney's Eurocentric racial discourse in its animation *Aladdin* (Clements and Musker 1992). Through the hyper-stereotypical representations of Middle Eastern populations as threatening, greedy, uncivilized and irrational, *Aladdin* reinforces the representative construction of the postcolonial Other not "by the properties the [subject] actually has but by those it is widely believed to have" (Beardsly 1981, p.107). Within *Aladdin*, a common merchant violently threatens Aladdin by raising his sword shouting, "I'll have your hands for a trophy, street rat!" (Clements and Musker 1992). However, as this merchant and all other antagonists in *Aladdin* have typically enhanced Middle-Eastern features and characteristics including Arabic accents, dark skin, pointy and hooked noses, and thick eyebrows and lips in contrast with the fairer skinned, American accents, and Caucasian features of the protagonists Jasmine, Aladdin, the Sultan and the Genie, Disney discretely reinforces the stereotype of the Other as savage and animal-like in order to adhere to the prevailing hegemonic ideologies of American racial superiority. As Disney animators are "never allowed to even momentarily invade the audience's comfort zone" (Ostman 1996, p.95) in fear of lowering their commercial profit, *Aladdin* exemplifies the high extent of which the replication of hegemonic discourse generally fails to promote the democratic interests of stimulating "intellectual admiration, wisdom, or revelation" (Schwatz 2013, p.80). Thus, the consolidation of global media markets held by the Walt Disney Company pose significant concerns regarding the international

diffusion of America's hegemonic ideologies in "shaping international social institutions" (Thussu 2006, p.146).

Seemingly paradoxical to this argument, as Kramer (2000) and Giroux (1996) argue that this characterization of the Other is not only ideological but economical to encourage international consuming habits, it is ostensible that the Walt Disney Company aims to represent a non-Eurocentric view of foreign and regional cultures to appeal to the 85.7% of its non-American market (UNESCO 2005). Rather than simply spreading "U.S. values and ways of life across developing countries" (Belkhyr 2013, p.45) in a form of cultural imperialism, this is countered by Disney's commercial goal of what Thussu (2006, p.146) describes as the "openness and mingling of a multiplicity of cultures". Epitomizing this, Disney's culturally attentive narrative surrounding a native American princess in *Pocahontas* (Gabriel and Goldberg 1995) could be seen as a commercial strategy in a response to the 1994 acquisition of the ABC television and radio network by the Walt Disney Company (Wayne 2003). As ABC owned ESPN which had a strong foothold in the Asian and Latin American markets, this substantiates Wayne's (2003, p. 95) comment that Disney's repositioning of its image within Latin American markets represents not the replication of an American culture, but the commercial "mining and extraction of cultural ore belonging to national and regional cultures". On one hand, it could be argued that the verisimilitude of Pocahontas' exotic and uncivilized characterization is historically inaccurate, and is exaggerated to justify white oppression over the uncivilized populations. However, the sheer historical and cultural acknowledgement of the disruption that the European Jamestown settlers induced upon the native Americans also demonstrates that ideologically "dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient" (Said 1987, p.11) is not Disney's first priority. Additionally, *Pocahontas*' rejection of patriarchal discourse embedded within earlier Disney animations including *Sleeping Beauty* (Geronimi and Clark 1959) and *Cinderella* (Geronimi and Luske 1950) also illustrates how Disney's commercial focus in foreign markets can even positively promote social reform contrary to America's hegemonic ideologies. This is substantiated by Condis (2016, p.2) who states that Pocahontas was not "defined by romantic relationships ... [but she was] one of the first princesses to actually take an active role in governing". This exact cultural and social appropriation due to

Disney's commitment to market diversity is also evident in the contextual Chinese representation within *Mulan* (Bancroft, Cook and Wen 1998). Due to China's limit on the number of foreign films entering its cinemas (Wang 2007), and its appealing market size of 1.38 billion inhabitants (Disney Annual Report 2016), Disney's co-production with the Chinese production company Shanghai Media Groups Pictures (Carver 1994, p.8) was necessary in distributing *Mulan* to the Chinese market. Thus, the adherence to China's conservative values and ideologies in the creation of *Mulan's* "Chinese elements" (Wang 2007, p.191) demonstrates how the Walt Disney Company are willing to edit "any culturally unfavourable textual content" (Jackson 1993, p.94) that would prevent it from maximising foreign profits. As this conjunction with local production partners is essential to the financial success of the Walt Disney Company and other global conglomerates, these contraflows cogently contradict the speculated homogenization of American content that eradicates local and foreign cultures.

However, complicating even this account, while a Habermasian model would have encompassed unfettered discourse for the creation of an "ideal speech situation ... [for] the public sphere" (Warf 2007, p.89), neoliberalism has made it possible for the Walt Disney Company to abandon its public service role in addressing all values and concerns held by those in rural regions, inner cities, smaller foreign markets, and certain racial groups linked to class (Warf 2007). As Disney only enforces ideologies "useful to Disney and capitalist society" (Artz 2014, p.116), Disney's exclusive 'cherry-picking' of its most valuable consumers demonstrates the extent of which its characterization and narration are at odds with democratic communities. This is perceptible in Disney's adaptation of its animations for foreign markets. While *Aladdin* converses in Malay and Spanish, there is no option for the native Arabic language (Artz 2014, p.123). Similarly, the Powhantan Pocahontas may not be able to speak her native language, but she can converse in French and Italian (Artz 2014, p.123). As Disney's most profitable audience comprises of English, Europeans, Japanese and Chinese speakers (Disney Annual Report 2006, p.66), the omission of certain foreign languages directly corresponds with the significantly smaller market size and potential profit obtained from particular linguistic regions. Thus, it is evident that Disney

bases its distribution of media not on the foundations of benefiting a global society, but on the financial output success of its foreign markets.

It is also this same commercial model in which the consumerist ideologies of elite coercion, hyper-individualism, social atomism and hierarchy are reinforced to justify capitalist globalisation, thereby dismissing of the values of solidarity, democracy and community concern. As Disney aligns the morals of its animated films to a corporate culture of “product licensing and private profits” (Herman and McChesney 1999, p.379), this has detrimental social implications for Disney’s demographic audience of young children. Disney’s commercial interests that tend to “sanitise the original and deny the essence and motivation” (Wasko 2001, p.125) of children’s fairy tales are reinforced in the hierarchal and elite coercion ideologies within *The Lion King* (Allers and Minkoff 1994). In this animation, the brightly animated king Mustafa and his son Simba talk with the accents and diction of British nobility, contrasting greatly with the distinctively dark-skinned underclass of the hyenas who speak in verbal slang and accents of Latino urban youth. As hierarchical discourse is propagated to infer that the existence of society depends on the maintenance of the “circle of life” (Allers and Minkoff 1994), the film not only implements anthropomorphism to replicate the prominent racial and class ideologies “deeply rooted in culture” (Whitlock 1990, p.13), but also emphasizes a self-individualist quest for “gratification, adventure and acquisition” (Artz 2014, p.139). As Simba seeks to be king and to acquire all land over the non-conforming class of hyenas and Scar, and Tarzan conspires against jungle law to win both Jane and human connection (Buck and Lima 1999), it is in this way that Disney’s themes consistently reinforce fulfilment through mass consumption. Epitomized by the deaths of the Disney’s villains including Scar, Kocoum, Hun and Clayton whose anthropomorphic class express non-conformity to a capitalist culture, it is evident that Disney’s ideologies and cultural themes are themselves “advertisements for Disney” (Artz 2014, p.140) that illustrate how the non-capitalist ‘hyenas’ of society fall flat in obtaining the social right of the elite. While Disney makes an effort in promoting certain cultural values and foreign control, it is Disney’s commercial orientation at the expense of racial and class structures that prevailingly contributes to an undemocratic grasp of social values acquired by children. As Ward (1996, p.177) states that Disney stories “form the

moral standards of children ... for later in life”, this focus on consumerist values is likely to shape a child’s understanding of the world away from an idealist representation of an equitable global society. Additionally, as Bettelheim (1997, p.83) comments that Disney animations are a medium themselves for advertisements, and are not the “fairy tales of imagination that children need”, it is evident that animators have very little stylistic and creative control over Disney’s content. As “the creative product, including technique and form, is pre-ordained” (Artz 2014, p.121), this effectively limits the variation of views and perspectives presented to children in making their own judgments.

Reinforcing this perspective of the global media debate, Disney’s dissentious consequences on the development of children’s societal values is not exclusively due to the replication of its global capitalist ideologies of elite coercion, hyper-individualism and hierarchy. As epitomized by *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) and *Aladdin* (1992), Disney appears to nurture young girls and boys in accepting traditional gender roles. These animated films have two common traits: The young women are depicted as inferior to ruling and authoritative men due to their restrictions within the domestic sphere, and their arduous lives are inescapable and incomplete without the presence of a man. This is exemplified in *Snow White* where Snow White herself must do the cooking and cleaning for the seven dwarves in return for the dwarves keeping her safe and rescuing her (Cottrell and Hand 1937). While *Cinderella* somewhat refutes the restrictions of the domestic sphere in her efforts to escape it, this is achieved only through her submissive relationship with Prince Charming (Geronimi and Luske 1950). As Orenstein states (2006, p.71) how the media is a powerful tool in conquering self-esteem issues of childhood by promoting “independent and original individuals ... [against] what society pressures to be”, it is evident that these Disney animations contradict this interpretation through gendered discourse that limits the female’s individualist choice. With powerful women who do not conform to these traditional gendered roles taking on antagonistic roles such as the “evil, ugly and unpleasant” (Towbin 2004, p.30) Grimhilde, Lady Tremaine and Maleficent, it is evident that the passive and weak feminine behaviours expressed by 86% of Disney princesses before 1995 (Coyne 2016) reinforce these damaging gendered stereotypes of how women should act and behave. Additionally, with approximately 87% of young American boys

also consuming some form of Disney's princess-centric media (Ryan 2016), this depiction of the hyper-masculine "strong, independent prince" (Towbin 2004, p.31) not only legitimizes male political and societal authority over females, but also pressurizes young boys in obtaining an "unhealthy set of unattainable standards" (Ryan 2016, p.31). Thus, these animations exemplify that the consolidation of Disney's power ultimately has detrimental implications on young children who consume these patriarchal and domestic ideologies.

However, as Disney "does not create stereotypes [but] simply reflects" (Belkhyr 2013, p.15) the hegemonic ideologies of the prevailing consuming audience, the relevance of Disney's perpetration of patriarchal and domestic discourse within its recent films and content is contested. While society had idealized the female's passively demure behaviour and her restrictions within the private sphere at the release of *Snow White* (1937) and *Cinderella* (1950), Steiff and Dundes (2017) note the inaptness of this argument today with Disney's dissemination of egalitarian ideologies that reflects a progressing society. These changing attitudes towards the treatment of class minorities, race and gender are evident in Disney's recent empowered and diverse heroines such as the Polynesian princesses Moana (Clements and Musker 2016), the native American princess Pocahontas (Gabriel and Goldberg 1995), the Chinese princess Mulan (Bancroft and Cook 1998), and the American princess Elsa (Buck and Lee 2013). However, despite these changes in cultural representation and gendered relations where "meeting prince charming is not the most important love" (Johnson 2010, p.12), it would be inapt to classify unbalanced gender representations within contemporary media as entirely absent. As Condis (2006, p.2) states that "Belle, Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty are often standing together and are more prevalent ... [in] Disney's line of products like lunch boxes and t-shirts", it is cogent that the advertising and merchandising of the Walt Disney Company does not reflect this progressive change in society. Rather, Disney's commercial interests in grouping these passive female princesses together still fortify racial and gendered inequality, and consequently undermine the validity of the arguments posed by those advocating for the globalization and integration of media conglomerates.

Similarly, while it is evident that there has been an increased cultural consideration of Disney's content in recent years, the international controversy of an "exclusively gay moment"

within the live-action *Beauty and the Beast* (Loughrey 2017, p.1) demonstrates that there are still fears today regarding a loss in the hegemonic values of non-Western countries due to the current media output of Western conglomerates. On one hand, the simultaneous response of Disney in eradicating this homosexual scene within certain foreign markets to abide with Russia and Malaysia's political and religious fears (Loughrey 2017) demonstrates how the commercial interests of conglomerates cannot be classified as a strict one-way flow of Western cultural values. However, on the other hand, if these markets had been insignificant to Disney's economic strategy, this scene may not have been removed or adapted. Thus, the Walt Disney Company's blurred divisions regarding whether its media output essentially benefits or demolishes a global democratic society complicates a resolution to the ongoing global media debate. Nonetheless, it is due to these blurred divisions that evidently signifies that the nature of media conglomerates moves not towards the interests and development of the audience as a whole, but towards prejudicially promoting cultural diversity and views only when substantial profits are involved.

Ultimately, the Walt Disney Company exemplifies that while its capitalist-driven willingness to adapt content for its conservative foreign markets, and its encouragement of indigenous production autonomy evidently contradicts a patent cultural imperialist flow of media content, the global media debate is not as simple as this. Despite Disney's flexibility in forming and altering content for culturally sensitive foreign markets, it is through its simultaneous capitalist incentive that essentially eradicates the expression of political views and perspectives belonging to other countries and social groups that encompass a weakened consuming audience. Thus, the Walt Disney Company demonstrates that the nature of the current oligopolistic media economy does not ultimately create the necessity for media conglomerates to respond to the needs of all of its consumers, nor does it require these conglomerates to address a variety of controversial issues. With limited competition between conglomerates, and unsubstantial competing power from independent companies due to the economic expansion and power of media conglomerates, this has overriding detrimental implications on the creativity and innovation of media output, and the existing social structures of race, gender and class. Therefore, it is evident that the concentration

of media ownership held by Disney and other giant conglomerates will never entirely adhere to the public's needs within a democratic society.

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